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THE PROBLEM OF THE HOUR¹

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The advocates of the first hospital training schools for nurses had in mind merely the teaching of the fundamentals of good bedside nursing, in order that they might secure more intelligent and efficient care for their patients in the hospitals. From this simple beginning, nursing has broadened out, until it has formed contacts with almost every phase of community life, social and economic. In this evolution of your chosen profession, I have been for over forty years an interested spectator, and, as a practical hospital man, a partial participant. Modern nursing in this country began in the late 70's, at about the same time that modern medicine began its great advance. It seems at first sight passing strange that such an impressive object lesson did not more speedily meet with popular response, and yet, on reflection, the real reason for delayed recognition of the larger opportunities awaiting the nursing profession is not far to seek. Social science, at that time, had made little progress, and was awaiting the remarkable stimulus to be given by the higher educational institutions, especially by the university extension courses.

During all these past forty years, several important events have been transpiring in the social, medical, and educational world, that have had a distinct influence in directing the course of the nursing profession into new fields of endeavor. The bacterial origin of disease, and the bacterial infection of wounds, with its remarkable influence on surgery and preventive medicine, was one of the most outstanding discoveries of the nineteenth century, and its influence on the future of the nursing profession has been far-reaching.

With the advent of bacteriology, public health and preventive medicine assumed at once a new and larger meaning. At the same time, sociology was making rapid strides. Social conditions were being studied more closely and their influence on the causation of disease was beginning to be understood.

Our experience on the Isthmus and in Cuba demonstrated the actual bacterial causation of yellow fever and malaria. We then knew, a fact which we had long surmised, that the so-called germ theory of disease was no longer a theory but a scientifically demonstrated fact. We clearly perceived that all these great scientific achievements were closely co-related. The bacterial causation of disease prepared the way for a revised public health service, for a more intelligent system of preventive medicine, and more intensive social work in the community.

¹ Portions of an address given to the New England Nurses' Association, May 10, 1921.

At about this same time, interest began to be taken in the health of operatives in the various industries. Out of this movement has grown the rather large special field of Industrial Medicine. Conservation of health among school children is another large allied field of constantly increasing usefulness. The school nurse is fast becoming a very important factor in the community. Soon, no state nor county can afford to be without its school nurse and its district nurse.

Child welfare, public health, industrial nursing, school nursing, with their varied social contacts, demand young women who have had either a high school or a college education, or their equivalent, and who are graduates of a Class A. hospital training school. The acceptable filling of these positions calls for young women of good judgment and discretion, capable of meeting emergencies as they arise; consequently, they need the mental discipline that a higher education alone can furnish.

The great war was not an unmixed evil. Out of its terrible experience, much good has followed. We learned the importance of conservation of human resources, mental as well as physical. Infant welfare and child welfare assumed immense importance when we considered that we must replace the enormous human wastage caused by the war. Mental hygiene, when viewed in terms of conservation of the mind of the nation, lent new interest to the somewhat neglected field of psychiatric medicine and mental hygiene. Malnutrition in school children was taken up with new zest. All these activities are closely identified with the nursing profession, indeed, they cannot be realized without your assistance.

Unfortunately, in this period of readjustment, following the war, and through which we are now passing, there is a woeful lack of nurses. So many avenues of employment offering large remuneration were made available by the war that many young women were diverted from the occupation of nursing, but, in the readjustments that will be sure to follow, there will be those who will eventually seek again the many fine opportunities that an enlarged nursing service offers.

In meeting the issue incident to the larger demands made upon the nursing profession, I am satisfied that we must revise our educational qualifications for candidates and our methods of training, to meet the new demands that have arisen.

Registration should be standardized throughout the country. Reciprocity between states would then be justified because of identical educational standards in all the states. The safety of the public requires that every nurse should be either a registered nurse or a trained attendant, and that all other persons advertising as nurses

should be licensed. The graduate nurse must have had a full high school or college education or its equivalent; for a trained attendant, a grammar school education should be sufficient. The words of Jane E. Hitchcock are pertinent:

At present, we have to reckon with the truth that we have adults with a mental training of girls of sixteen, submitting themselves to examination in subjects that are adapted to adult minds.

The problem of the hour is: How will the hospital training school of the future adjust itself to the demands of the times? The public requires certain qualifications on the part of the nurse. The poor man must perforce keep within the limitations of his pocket-book. The industrial world, public health service, innumerable social activities, are calling for the highest type of educated nurse. The hospital training schools throughout the country have hitherto served the utilitarian purpose of securing an economical nursing force for the hospitals. The scarcity of nurses, the dearth of new candidates, the diversion of young women into other more lucrative and less exacting occupations, are pressing for a change in method.

This change will come in the way of higher standardization in the technical training offered, greater laboratory facilities, shorter hours, an increase in the number of accredited schools in the larger centers, a proportionate decrease in the number of indifferent schools, courses of instruction for trained attendants, in many of the smaller hospitals, a re-classification of the nursing force of the country into graduate nurses and trained attendants. In some such way as this will hospital training school development occur. Such was the line along which the medical schools progressed. The changes suggested will at first be unpopular with hospital managements, who are hard pressed for funds and who cannot get away from the exploitation of the pupil nurse as an economic saving to the hospital.

These proposed changes stand for the betterment of your great profession. They mean progression and not retrogression. They mean uniformity of standardization in all the states. They mean that a constantly increasing body of better educated young women will apply for admission to the nursing course. Our best training schools will become institutions of learning, qualified to prepare young women for the highest type of nursing service. This is an achievement worth attaining. It cannot be secured without coöperative effort on the part of the nursing profession. So I say to you, work for the highest ideals of your profession, for proper educational qualifications in the young women who are about to join your ranks, insist on uniformity of examination for registration in the several states, and for standards in training that will enable future graduates to successfully fill any of the responsible positions to which the graduate nurse of the present day may be called.